

Residential areas west of the Glenn Highway are unlike those to the east in that the different subdivisions are not linked. This can contribute to **traffic** congestion on major routes because of a lack of internal circulation. Although a grid street pattern is probably neither suitable nor desirable in these areas, it is recommended that the City require subdividers to consider the relationship of their developments to adjacent subdivisions. Linkages need not be direct or, in some cases, may consist of only a walkway.

Almost all residential lots within Palmer's present city limits are connected to the city water and sewer system. However, this may not be the case in the future as the city expands its boundaries westward. For example, topographic constraints caused by kettles and moraines in the area immediately south of the Palmer-Wasilla Highway are likely to make the extension of sewer services there unfeasible. Large lot residential development with high-end single family units may be more practical in such areas. It would also serve to broaden the variety of Palmer's housing stock and make the city a more desirable place to live for a broader segment of the Valley's population. The City could also consider giving tax incentives to developers who include green ways and trails as part of their developments.

Within the mature established part of town, the city should continue to encourage the upgrading of its existing housing stock. One way that the City can accomplish this is through a city business and privately-sponsored rehabilitation program which would give incentives to homeowners to repair or make improvements to their homes. In addition, programs to require the removal of **junked** vehicles and inappropriate storage materials from residential subdivisions would help instill greater pride on the part of neighborhood residents.

The improvement of local streets including paving, curbs, gutters, and sidewalks would greatly improve the appearance of these areas. Since pavement is less expensive to maintain than gravel roads, the City of Palmer should contemplate picking up a percentage of the costs. In an effort to reduce the cost of construction, the City should **also** investigate the use of private contractors.

ANNEXATION

It is a major recommendation **of this** plan that Palmer adopt an aggressive annexation strategy to help guide its **future** development. The City of Palmer Planning & Zoning Commission **will** annually review the annexation policies and activities by no later than its April **regular** meeting and prepare a report with recommendations to the City Council by July 1 of each year. Such a recommendation is consistent with findings of the Local Boundary Commission. A Local Boundary Commission **staff** report for Palmer's most recent annexation petition noted that "the local boundary commission has for several years been urging the City of Palmer to address the problem of jurisdictional enclaves in a comprehensive, rather than on a piecemeal basis."

Palmer's ability to plan for future growth is presently constrained by its very small physical area. Of Alaska's sixteen mid-sized (2,000 to 6,000 residents) cities, Palmer has the smallest area, greatest population density and strongest recent growth.

- Area. Palmer’s land area takes in only 3.7 square miles. ~~less~~ than one-tenth the average area of Alaska’s mid-sized cities.
- Density. Palmer’s 1996 population density (1,162 persons per square mile) was double that of the next most densely populated city (Soldotna) and more than twelve times that of the average mid-sized city.
- Growth Rate. Between 1990 and 1996, Palmer has added more new residents (1,426 persons) than any other mid-sized city and has grown at a faster rate than all but Craig.

Given these impressive statistics, the City of Palmer’s boundaries are extremely modest compared with other mid-sized cities. Palmer’s boundaries are even more constricted when the relatively large amount of non-residential land within the city taken up by the airport, golf course, the Alaska State Fair and other institutional uses is considered. Unlike most of the other mid-sized cities, Palmer is not an isolated community. A significant share of the Palmer area’s recent growth has taken place in the urban fringe outside the City’s municipal boundaries.

Since its incorporation in 1951, the City of Palmer has completed 43 separate annexations, many of them during the early 1980’s when the area experienced a period of rapid growth. Most annexations have been very small scale, typically in response to the desire of individuals and businesses to hook up to Palmer’s water and sewer system rather than being the result of any coordinated plan for municipal expansion. As a result, the City’s boundaries are very irregular and encompass several huge inholdings. In the future, as Palmer continues to grow, the inadequacy of its existing boundaries is likely to increasingly cause difficulties in the logical delivery of City services.

**LAND AREA, POPULATION DENSITY & POPULATION GROWTH
MID-SIZED ALASKA CITIES, 1996**

City	1996 Population	Land Area	Persons Per Square Mile	1990-1996 Population Growth	1990-1996 Percent Growth(%)
Bethel	5,106	44.3	115	432	9.0
Wasilla	4,714	11.2	421	686	17.0
Palmer	4,282	3.7	1,162	1,426	50.0
Barrow	4,276	18.8	227	817	24.0
Valdez	4,254	218.8	19	186	5.0
Unalaska	4,087	104.3	39	998	32.0
Homer	4,064	10.9	372	404	11.0
Soldotna	3,968	6.9	572	486	14.0

City	1996 Population	Land Area	Persons Per Square Mile	1990-1996 Population Growth	1990-1996 Percent Growth(%)
Nome	3,511	13.8	255	11	0.0
Petersberg	3,356	43.8	77	149	5.0
Seward	2,914	15.4	189	215	8.0
Kotzebue	2,821	26.9	105	70	3.0
Wrangell	2,595	58.9	44	116	5.0
Cordova	2,537	4.6	549	427	20.0
Dillingham	2,226	32.7	68	209	10.0
Craig	2,109	5.9	357	849	67.0
AVERAGE	3.551	38.8	91		12.0

Note: Land area is in square miles, as reported by the 1990 decennial census.

Sources: Alaska Department of Labor
U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Not only can the City of Palmer make a very strong case that it needs additional area for community expansion, but it also has a great deal to offer urbanizing areas outside its corporate limits. No other place in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough comes close to offering the breadth and quality of municipal **services** that are enjoyed by Palmer residents. Four services in particular stand out. They are:

- An excellent piped water and sewer system, including **sewage** treatment, that serves essentially all areas within the city.
- High quality local law enforcement services provided by the City police department. The presence of Alaska State Troopers in the community is an additional asset.
- Exceptional fire protection services, which in combination with the citywide piped water system and the enforcement **of local** building codes, are reflected in a very good **fire** rating of 4, **the** best in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. The good fire rating, in turn, results in significantly lower fire insurance premiums for Palmer residents than for people living outside the city.
- Good street maintenance and snow removal services. Palmer's compact form enables these services to be provided more efficiently than is **possible** in less densely developed areas.

Palmer also has many other assets. Included among these is the fact that Palmer residents have some certainty that structures within the City limits were built to code. Their neighborhoods are also protected **from** the intrusion of incompatible uses because Palmer has **enforced** local zoning for many years. Traditionally, these conditions have not always been considered to be assets in the **Matanuska-**

Susitna Borough. However, increasing densities and land use **conflicts** in the “Core” area are changing attitudes toward land use regulation.

Annexation. Policies

After review and consideration of various alternatives, this plan recommends that the City adopt the certificated sewer service area as the conceptual boundary for the expansion **of the** City. This concept should be filed with the Local Boundary Commission and individual annexation petitions should be used to implement the concept (SEE APPENDIX A)

The implementation of this concept **will** serve the needs of the City and the **land** owners in areas of possible annexation. By providing advance notice to land owners and residences in areas of possible annexation, they would be in a stronger position to prepare for incorporation into the City. Land developers would have the opportunity to work with the City and plan land uses as well as timing. The City **would** be in a stronger position to plan for the extension of services to newly acquired areas. Negotiate the possible timing of annexation with the land owners/developers and be in a position to work with the Matanuska-Susitna Borough to develop **extraterritorial** planning and zoning powers within the area proposed for annexation.

The City of Palmer shall pursue a policy of annexation to extend its boundaries for one or more of the following reasons:

- In response to a request by an individual property owner or group of property owners, where the property is **physically** contiguous with existing City boundaries, and the annexation will improve or not unduly impair the provision of City services.
- To eliminate enclaves within the City’s boundaries.
- To promote investment in existing City facilities and their **logical** expansion. The primary examples of such facilities are the Palmer airport, including clear zones; the City’s water and sewer system, including water wells and sewage treatment facilities; and the City’s new commercial/industrial park.
- To promote the logical extension of City water and sewer utility systems. Any annexation for this reason must be preceded by water and sewer planning which provides at least conceptual layouts of expanded utility systems, together with preliminary cost estimates.

This annexation policy promotes investment in existing city facilities and their logical, cost effective expansion and encourages the City to explore transitional measures as step annexation and/or contract zoning to facilitate the ongoing annexation efforts.

Municipal Policies in Future Annexation Areas

Existing land use in the area surrounding Palmer’s existing city limits is primarily taken up by agriculture and single family homes, although the area also includes scattered commercial, industrial

and institutional uses. The City of Palmer strongly **supports** continued agricultural development. Nevertheless, in the future, some lands now used for agriculture will be occupied by residential subdivisions. As the limited amount of remaining residential land within Palmer is developed, the financial incentive for owners to convert nearby agricultural land, particularly that used less intensively, will increase commensurately. Additional commercial development is also expected to take place, particularly at key spots along the Glenn and Palmer-Wasilla Highways.

During the next twenty years, significant amounts of land now outside Palmer's city limits will probably be annexed to accommodate community growth and the logical expansion of municipal utilities to serve that growth. Until such areas are actually annexed, the City of Palmer has no direct jurisdiction over how development in those areas takes place. Nevertheless, it is important that the City establish policies on how it plans to handle future annexation areas, particularly when use of the legislative annexation process is proposed. Not only **will** this assist Palmer in planning for its future overall growth, but it will enable land owners and businesses outside Palmer to better understand how they might be affected by annexation actions.

Although it has no direct jurisdiction over areas outside its corporate limits, the City of Palmer is using this plan to state its interest in eventually annexing lands within its existing sewer service area. **As** an interested party, the City requests that it be kept informed of major developments, including plans for transportation improvements and the siting of proposed community facilities within its sewer service area. Such developments have the potential for influencing the timing and direction of future annexation actions by the City.

The following annexation policies are recommended to be implemented by the City of Palmer.

1. **Annexation Planning.** Prior to proceeding with any annexation petition the City of Palmer will undertake a detailed planning study of the area proposed for annexation. This will include meeting with affected property owners to explain the reason(s) for the proposed annexation action and to obtain feedback, to delineate recommended future land uses, and to indicate how and when municipal **services** (including public safety, utilities, streets and trails) will be extended to the area, together with any associated costs. Particularly when significant changes in land use are contemplated, factors such as topography, drainage, sight lines, **traffic** impacts and utility requirements must be considered. The recommendations of the planning study will be incorporated into any annexation proposal submitted to the Alaska Local Boundary Commission.
2. **Zoning of Annexed Areas.** At the present time, areas annexed to the City of Palmer are automatically classed as R-1, with any needed zoning adjustments being made within 60 days following the annexation action. It is recommended that the City of Palmer continue to implement this policy. However, regardless of future recommended land uses in areas proposed for annexation, it is recommended that existing uses in such areas be treated as "uses by right" (i.e., as a permitted use) and be given **grandfather** rights within the 60-day period following annexation. **In** other words, existing land use and zoning in annexed areas **will** initially be synonymous.

Two exceptions to the “use by right” policy are recommended. The first is to extend screening and buffering requirements contained in Palmer’s zoning regulations to annexed areas and require compliance for all new development. The second exception is where an existing use poses a threat to health and safety. In such cases, the use will be required to be brought to an acceptable standard or otherwise abated.

3. New Development in Annexed Areas. Following annexation, all new development will comply with all applicable City of Palmer codes.